

Botox bashes may be the rage, but adults-only parties put smiles on everyone's faces.

Michelle Tuccitto, Register Staff
August 8, 2002

Marisa Manley passes around flavored lotions for guests at a party to sample, then makes suggestions for how they can use them to spice up their love lives.

And the lotions are just the beginning. While women have long gathered together for Tupperware, crystal, and makeup parties, Manley's Athena's by Marisa, offers a sensual twist.

Manley, who calls herself a fulfillment expert and educator, makes a living at private parties, where she highlights and sells the latest in aromatherapy, books, lotions, games and adult toys from the Rhode Island-based Athena's Home Novelties.

"It is an up and coming thing – people from all walks of life want to go to these shows. It is a good time, you can learn something new, and you don't have to go to an adult bookstore, where a lot of people feel uncomfortable," Manley said.

Her customers in some professions, such as teachers, avoid adult stores for fear of risking their jobs, she added.

People have called her after parties to thank her when they experience something new with the help of one of her items, she said.

"People trust me, and I get every single question," Manley said. "People share their experiences, and when your girlfriends say something is good, you believe them."

The Vernon resident started this new line of work in April 2001. She wanted a business to do in her own time and that allowed her to stay home with her children. Manley does three parties a week and has sold up to \$2,000 per show.

Suburban housewives, nurses, secretaries and college professors are among those who've been hostesses. Customers must be at least age 18 to attend a party. Hostesses earn free toys and lotions based on the amount of sales.

At one of her recent parties, Manley demonstrated massage mitts, and straightforwardly explained all the features of a variety of battery-operated gizmos. Guests quickly get into the spirit, sharing tips, asking questions and joking.

The items for sale range from gels and sprays with pheromones to a belly dancing workout video. Candles, scented oils, massage lotions and creams, card games and other games for lovers, edible lotions and body paints, jewelry and how-to books are among the areas, along with handcuffs, whips, blindfolds, paddles, erotic candles and muffin tins and games like Pin the Hose on the Fireman.

As Manley highlights the products, guests can write down their wish list in an Athena's Home Novelties booklet that describes all the wares. At the end of the party, everyone goes into a separate room for privacy to place their orders.

One customer, Tara, 27, of New Haven, who asked that her last name not be used, went to a friend's party and then decided to be a hostess herself.

"These parties are definitely fun," she said. "It lets you know this stuff is out there, and it's OK – it isn't taboo to do this. At my party, people ended up giggling and

blushing. This company zeroes in on women's health and well-being, and it is about time."

Cassie Timmons of Ellington, who has been to three parties, said she felt anxious when she went to her first one, but quickly felt comfortable. "It wasn't embarrassing at all, and I really enjoyed the way she presented the products," Timmons said. "It has actually improved my marriage – I'm more aware of myself and what I like."

Athena's Home Novelties is named after the Greek goddess of wisdom and claims to be dedicated to advancing female fulfillment.

The 5-year-old company has 14 distributors like Manley in Connecticut and 130 overall working in 12 states, according to owner Jennifer Jolicoeur.

"When a woman goes into a store to buy these items, they are intimidated and may not feel comfortable," said Jolicoeur. "Where they are comfortable is in their own homes at a get together with their girlfriends and enjoying conversation. We put the zing back into at-home parties."

While women can easily buy cosmetics at a drugstore, she noted that women still go to makeup parties because they're fun.

Her distributors carry much of their stock with them, so party guests who buy them can take them home and start having fun immediately.

"We talk about sex with dignity and dispel myths," said Jolicoeur. "What women need is someone to say it is OK to enjoy sex – to have a ball. We've broken down a lot of barriers that have been put up by society, and the feedback has been nothing but positive."

Jolicoeur estimated that there are about 200 companies like hers across the country.

Anna Schildroth, an instructor in public health at Southern Connecticut State University, teaches a course in human sexuality. "The problem with most of the adult bookstores is that they are geared toward men, but there are a few which are geared toward women," Schildroth said.

She cited the Good Vibrations chain and Rena's Ultra Boutique in Seymour as examples of stores that might be more appealing to women.

"I have talked to one person who has been to one of these parties," said Schildroth. "It's the new take on Tupperware, cosmetic and jewelry parties. It makes the novelties more available to a wider group of people. It's the equivalent of renting an X-rated film instead of going to a theater – people feel more comfortable."

- For more about Athena's by Marisa, call (860) 539-3950 or e-mail her at athenasbymarisa@snet.net.